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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the early stages of a 3-year evaluation of the Early Intervention Programme in Scotland. The Early Intervention Programme is a high-profile government initiative which receives major government funding (60 million pounds sterling over 5 years) and is designed to improve standards of literacy and numeracy in the first 2 years of primary school. The paper presents some early findings. Firstly, it illustrates the range of early intervention schemes, and explores the extent to which these represent different understanding of the overall purpose of the programme. Secondly, the paper draws upon survey data gathered on stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of the Early Intervention Programme as it develops. The stakeholders include headteachers, class teachers, learning support teachers and classroom assistants, as well as educational psychologists and local authority personnel who have played a significant role in the design and/or implementation of schemes in their area. (RS)

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the Early Intervention Programme in Scotland**

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**Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Lahti,
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Background

The Early Intervention Programme (EIP) was first launched in Scotland in June 1997. Its aim was to raise the standards of reading, writing and numeracy in the first two years of primary school (Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), 1998). It is widely recognised that family poverty and home-area deprivation exacerbate inequalities in attainment. It was thus considered necessary 'to overcome by intervention the disadvantages and inequalities of social and domestic background' (SOEID, 1996). The EIP, which began as a three-year programme, has now been extended to run for five years and the budget increased to £60 million.

The National Evaluation of Early Intervention (1998 to 2001) is now funded by the new Scottish Executive. We are gathering data to explore impact on pupil attainment; issues relating to best value for money; and perceptions of all those involved.

An interesting aspect of the Scottish programme is that local authorities have had a considerable degree of autonomy in deciding how to develop their own literacy and numeracy projects. Two SOEID publications (Harrison 1996 and Fraser 1998), summarising research findings on reading and on early intervention, were widely disseminated and local authorities were asked to prepare bids for their individual projects. Consequently, monies are being spent variously on extra staff, extra classroom support, intensive staff development, and in some cases also on external evaluation. Some authorities have focused on a small number of schools; others have phased in new groups of schools each year; and yet others have included all schools from the beginning. Around 30,000 Primary 1 and Primary 2 pupils were involved in the programme in 1997/98. By the end of June 1999 there were approximately 81,000.

This paper will deal with some selected early findings on pupil attainment at the Primary 3 stage, prior to intervention; perceptions of attainment as the initiative proceeds; how the different people involved perceive the purposes of the EIP and some aspects of the impact of the programme on practice.

Attainment

An important measure of the success of the (EIP) in Scotland is the extent to which it will result in measurable gains in reading and maths in the early years of primary school. In addition to the assessment data being gathered by individual local authorities, we have established a national 'baseline' of Primary 3 performance in 1998, before Early Intervention, and will compare that with Primary 3 performance in 2000, after Early Intervention.

We administered a standardised test in reading and maths (PIPS) to a cohort of almost two thousand pupils in P3 in May/June 1998. PIPS provides a standardised measure of attainment in both these key areas and also asks schools for some important personal information about individual pupils: their age and home post-code. We also sought extra information from the schools about individual pupils' free-meal entitlement (FME), in order that we might compare the attainments of those pupils, with pupils who were not entitled to free school meals. We shall complete further analyses on the data, but this paper simply describes the attainment of the 1998 pre-intervention cohort of P3 pupils. At the end of the testing period in 2000 our findings will be complemented by the findings of each individual local authority who will be carrying out a variety of their own measures to monitor pupil progress.

Our first round of assessments was conducted in sixty-four schools in the summer term of the school session 1997/1998: two schools in each education authority in Scotland. In our final report of the findings, after the second round of assessments in the Spring of 2000, we will need to ensure that any gains in attainment are attributable specifically to the EIP, and not to other general factors which might have obtained in all schools. We have therefore included two groups of schools in our initial design — thirty-two 'EIP' schools and thirty-two 'non-EIP' schools. In most authorities there was a clear focus, in at least the first phase, on selected schools, and our EIP/ non EIP groups in the sample will reflect that focus.

Key findings at Primary 3 in May 1998 (pupils not affected by EIP)

- There was no significant difference in average FME between sample schools and non-sample schools. Our sample therefore, in this respect, reflects the Scottish population of schools.
- There was a wide age range in the P3 sample (6.5 to 8.5 years).
- Pupils with free school meal entitlement (FME) performed significantly less well in both reading and maths than pupils without FME.
- Pupils attending schools with a high school level of FME were at a considerable added disadvantage.
- Girls performed significantly better than boys in reading.
- There was no significant sex difference in relation to attainment in maths.
- Pupils aged between 7.5 and 8.3 years performed significantly better than the youngest or oldest pupils

Perceptions

Data on what people *think* is happening is an important strand in the research. The first round of our survey of stakeholders' perceptions was conducted in March 1999. We will repeat the exercise in the Spring of 2000, in order to ascertain any changes in priorities, attitudes and beliefs as the EIP evolves. The school sample (17%) was representative of all the schools who had been in the EIP since the beginning. We achieved an overall response rate of 67%. The sample comprised

- 80 headteachers
- 214 Primary 1 and 2 class teachers
- 72 learning support teachers working in P 1 and 2 in relation to the EIP
- 57 nursery nurses and classroom assistants working with P 1 and 2 as part of the EIP
- 32 local authority staff involved in the implementation of the EIP
- 27 educational psychologists involved with the EIP.

This paper will focus on a small selection of the findings, namely, perceptions of the impact on attainment; perceptions of overall purpose and some perceptions of the impact on practice.

Perceived impact on attainment

The data gathered on perceptions of attainment so far are encouraging. For example, a minimum of 75% of respondents in all groups said that some or most of Primary 1 and 2 children were reading better than children in previous years. However, it appears that Local Authority staff are more confident in the effectiveness of almost all aspects of the EIP than are Primary 1 and 2 teachers.

- All stakeholders believed that the EIP was associated with net gains in attainment
- 80% of local authority staff said that the EIP had been very or extremely effective for disadvantaged pupils
- Only 40% of Primary 1 and 2 teachers said that the EIP had been very or extremely effective for disadvantaged pupils
- Primary 1 and 2 teachers thought that the highest achievers were benefiting most
- There was no difference in Primary 1 and 2 teachers' views on the effectiveness of the EIP for boys and girls
- Local authority staff think that the EIP is more effective for girls in literacy and boys in numeracy

Purposes

The six stakeholder groups were asked to identify what they considered the three most important purposes from a list of nine options. Some of the options were related to specific aspects of social and education policy, for example, 'to target resources for learning in areas of multiple social deprivation' (social inclusion); 'to increase the opportunity to set targets for groups and classes' 'to identify and support pupils making

poor progress' and 'to enhance all pupils' levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy' (target setting and raising standards). Other statements related more to process rather than to end purpose. For example, is one of the purposes of Early Intervention 'to foster a stimulating learning environment in the classroom'? Is the promotion of children's enjoyment of books and reading, number and counting considered one of the primary aims of the EIP? Respondents were then asked to identify the *least* important purpose from the same series of statements.

Their views are summarised below:

- 'Enhancing attainment for all' was considered the most salient purpose of the EIP
- All groups rated providing a foundation for later learning in the first three
- 'Identifying and supporting pupils making poor progress' was not rated highly
- 'The opportunity to set targets' was considered the least important purpose by all groups

Impact on practice

We were interested to discover whether school-based staff and local authority staff thought there had been significant changes in classroom practice since the introduction of the EIP. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements describing the climate in their classroom, school or authority. Early indications are rather positive. It should be noted, however, that local authority staff were generally more positive than their school-based colleagues. For example, 31% of Primary 1 and 2 staff thought that there was now 'too much pressure on early stages' teachers', whereas only 7% of local authority staff thought that this was the case; 46% of teachers thought that their workload had increased significantly — but only 14% of local authority staff believed this.

Our preliminary findings are summarised below:

- 65% of Primary 1 and 2 teachers reported being more confident in their professional practice
- The vast majority all groups thought that more time was spent in direct teaching of literacy
- A significant majority of all groups thought that more was expected of Primary 1 and 2 pupils
- 19% of learning support teachers thought there was too much pressure on Primary 1 and 2 pupils
- 58% of Primary 1 and 2 teachers reported that they had increased enthusiasm for teaching
- 69% of Primary 1 and 2 teachers reported being more aware of the evidence base in literacy research
- 17% of headteachers had doubts about the long-term impact of the EIP

We recognise the potential impact on practice of having nursery nurses and classroom assistants working with Primary 1 and 2 teachers. We are currently analysing questionnaire data relating to perceptions of inter-professional working, and shall present our findings on this later in the year. In the course of our analysis, we shall also be able to explore the perceived effectiveness of various staff development initiatives, and to assess their impact on classroom practice

Some points for discussion

It is a convenient cliché that research raises more questions than answers. However, it is appropriate that we should conclude by asking

- Is the EIP really about fostering social inclusion?
- Or is the EIP mainly about raising attainment for all?
- To what extent are these objectives compatible?
- Why is it that teachers are more cautious in their assessment of the EIP's effectiveness?
- Are the local authorities taking too rosy a view?
- What do we mean by evidence-based practice in education?

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